

Memorial

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer



More than 8,000 U.S. soldiers killed during World War II are buried at Margraten U.S. Military Cemetery in the Netherlands.

RAIN poured from the dark sky. An unseasonably cold wind whipped the treetops and bowled over hundreds of folding chairs that had been carefully arranged for visitors to the 55th Memorial Day service at Margraten U.S. Military Cemetery.

Here, where the borders of Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands meet in the little Dutch village of Vaals, the people especially love Americans, said Rita Hoefnagels, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Army's 254th Base Support Battalion, headquartered in Schinnen.

"It was the Americans — and *only* the Americans — who liberated Limburg from the Germans during World War II," Hoefnagels said.

So as the wind raged and the rain poured down, hundreds of visitors and dignitaries, from a representative of Netherlands' queen to those from military units and civic organizations, paid their respects. Service members from the United States and other NATO nations placed dozens of colorful flower wreaths in a semicircle behind a speaker's podium that faced the crowd, as an Army band played and Air Force fighters flew overhead in the "Missing Man" formation.

On the first Memorial Day service here, May 30, 1945 — three weeks after the final capitulation of Germany — the people of South Limburg collected 20 truckloads of flowers from people in 60 Dutch villages, city records show. Nearly 200 people had worked through the night to place wreaths and flowers on more than 17,000 graves.

Walter Jager and his wife, Annie, have attended the Margraten ceremony for years. He and fellow Hollander Bill Smits were members of the Dutch resistance, whose members served with the U.S. Army's 29th Infantry Division, Jager said.

"We were with the 29th from Kerkrade, Netherlands, through

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Germany, to the Ardennes offensive in December 1944, when many division soldiers were killed,” Smits said.

Jager remembered an episode in Julich, Germany, during which he saw an American soldier killed. “I never knew his name, but when I look at the crosses at Margraten, I wonder if he’s here or on U.S. soil.

“Whoever he is, I owe him a great debt of gratitude,” Jager said. “We were soldiers without training, doing things like breaking into the German ration-card offices or disrupting the trains that carried supplies into Germany. The American soldiers were with us to keep us safe. It was an irony when one of them died instead of one of us.”

In 1945 the two men volunteered to dig graves for U.S. service members who were to be buried at Margraten, Jager said.

After 1945 more than 11,000 of the dead who had initially been buried at Margraten were returned to the States. Today, 8,302 Americans are still buried there — among them 40 sets of brothers who are buried side-by-side, said retired MG John Herrling, secretary of the American Battle Monu-

ments Commission, which maintains U.S. military war cemeteries around the world.

Because policy of the time was that no U.S. service member be buried in Germany, casualties of Operation Market Garden, the Battle of the Bulge, Hürtgen Forest and others are buried at Margraten.

Rosalend Grabowski’s father — then-PVT Thomas Sylvester, a member of the 102nd Inf. Div. — is buried in the Netherlands.

Grabowski and her husband, Frank, came from Warrington, Pa., to attend the Margraten ceremony for the fourth consecutive year. Grabowski’s father was in a foxhole near Limburg when he was hit by heavy fire on Dec. 5, 1944, she said. “I was a year old.” Sylvester, who was 26 at the time of his death, also had two sons.

When Ninth Army soldiers established the cemetery in 1944, Dutch families “adopted” graves to care for, Herrling said.

Today, the children and grandchildren of the original caretakers continue to place flowers at the simple white crosses on holidays, birthdays and commemorative occasions.

M. Kemper, a Dutch woman from Heerlen, who adopted a grave in 1949, has visited and placed flowers at David Albright’s grave since his birthday on March 3 that year.

Through the years, she’s exchanged letters with Albright’s parents. The Army Air Corps pilot had been shot down over Maagdenburg, Germany, on Sept. 28, 1944. He was 22, married and never met his child, who was born four days before Christmas 1944.

Today, U.S. military veterans return to the Netherlands, too, to visit the families who befriended them so many years ago.



U.S. and Dutch soldiers carry one of the many wreaths laid each year at Margraten.

Clark Cutting, then a sergeant with the 65th Armored Field Artillery Battalion that was attached to the 2nd Armd. Div., still visits the son of a family with whom he traded cigarettes for milk and eggs in 1944.

“After the war, the Dutch schoolteacher, now deceased, wrote to my parents to see if I survived,” Cutting said. “My family has visited the man’s wife, who’s now 90, and her children, including her son, J. Senden, who lives in Schinveld. And they’ve visited us.”

“I was 7 when Cutting came to our home in 1944,” said Senden, an aircraft hydraulics specialist who works for the U.S. military as chief accountant for NATO’s early-warning system, AWACS. “After the war, Cutting wrote letters to my dad, who had to have them translated. I took over that job after I learned English.”

Today, Army strength in the Netherlands has decreased significantly, but the Dutch are not apt to forget the important role the U.S. military has played in Europe, said U.S. Army, Europe, and Seventh Army deputy commander LTG Larry Jordan.

“U.S. soldiers provided the ultimate sacrifice that literally saved freedom and democracy,” he said. “A Europe without borders is largely the result of what they did here.” □



Hollanders turn out in force at Margraten every Memorial Day to show their respect for America’s fallen soldiers.